George Saunders, Famous for Futuristic Short Stories, Hits No. 1 With a Historical Novel

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Highlight: “Lincoln in the Bardo,” about the president mourning his young son, goes straight to the top of the hardcover fiction list.

Body

Mourning in America: Could Joe Biden have been the next Abraham Lincoln? That thought came to mind recently thanks to George Saunders’s debut novel, *“Lincoln in the Bardo”* (new at No. 1 in hardcover fiction), which centers on Lincoln’s sorrow over the death of his young son. Biden, you may remember, opted not to run for president shortly after his son Beau died of cancer in 2015 — a wrenching and understandable decision, of course, but one cast in retrospective relief by the suggestion in Saunders’s novel that private grief made Lincoln a better public servant. “What moved me about Lincoln’s arc during his presidency,” Saunders told me via email, “was the way that the burdens of the office — the floundering war effort, intense public criticism, the mistakes he made that were costing so many lives, the death of his son — beat him down and made him sorrowful, but also, almost causally, seemed to expand the reach of his empathy, so that, by the end, it included soldiers on both sides and the millions of Americans being enslaved by other Americans. It seemed to me that the empathy was somehow a byproduct of the sorrow — a burning-away of his hopes and dreams that resulted in a kind of naked seeing of things as they really were. For me, the book was about that terrible conundrum: We seem to be born to love, but everything we love comes to an end. What do we do with that? How can we keep going and live positive lives under that shadow? I came to understand Lincoln as someone so beat down by sadness and loss that he developed a sort of crazy wisdom — as if, in sadness, all of the comforting bromides that normally keep us from the harsher truths were denied him. Empathy might even thrive best in this state, where the easy comforts are denied us. Conversely, empathy doesn’t do well in a climate of fear or anxiety, when one forgets the particular and individual and, in a panic, begins theorizing about whole groups of people without knowing many of them.”

Comfort Food: This columnist is a little skeptical about Americans’ sudden embrace of the Danish hygge trend — the word, pronounced “HOO-gah” (rhymes with “boo-yah”), means “comfort,” more or less — but there’s no arguing with success, and Meik Wiking’s “Little Book of Hygge” is No. 9 in its fourth week on the advice and how-to list, available online. “One of the most hyggelig evenings we have had,” Wiking writes at one point, “was the time we tried to make sausages. . . . The result: disastrous. The first taste sensation I got was mold. Not exactly what you are looking for in a sausage. We might have gone to bed slightly hungry that night — but the evening had been very hyggelig.” There, now you’re skeptical, too.

Hitmaker: The highest-ranking newcomer to the hardcover nonfiction list is “This Life I Live,” a memoir by the country singer and songwriter Rory Feek, at No. 2.

PHOTO

‘The empathy was somehow a byproduct of the sorrow.’

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